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Health guru Michael Roizen's next mission: Cleveland

By Jean Dubail, The Plain Dealer

December 31, 2007, 11:21AM

Tracy Boulian/The Plain Dealer Dr. Michael Roizen, chief wellness officer at the Cleveland Clinic, middle, talks with Iyaad Hasan, right, program director of tobacco treatment, and Linda Skolaris, supervisor at the Pace Clinic, a preoperative clinic at the Cleveland Clinic, about a new stop-smoking program. Roizen, a nationally known health guru, has been the Clinic's chief wellness officer for the last six months.

Hear Roizen discuss...

Clinic Chief Executive Toby Cosgrove (mp3)

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Looking to get healthier in the New Year? The Cleveland Clinic wants to help.

As a regular on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and co-author of the best-selling "You" books, the Clinic's Dr. Michael Roizen has earned national fame as a health guru. Now, in his latest role, Roizen is charged with taking his message of health to the Clinic's employees, patients and the Greater Cleveland community.

Roizen, 61, was named the Clinic's chief wellness officer six months ago and has been planning initiatives for 2008, including launching a farmer's market near the system's main campus this summer and reaching into the local school system to mentor kids. He also hopes to offer programs for residents who want to stop smoking or lose weight.

"If we're in health care, we shouldn't be just developing the best illness care in the world but we really have to be walking the walk and talking the talk," Roizen said.

The importance of Roizen's position, a top executive spot created by Clinic Chief Executive Toby Cosgrove, is unusual in the corporate world and demonstrates how serious the hospital system considers the task of helping people become healthy.

Laura Brownlee, member-services team leader of the nation's oldest wellness organization, the National Wellness Institute in Stevens Point, Wis., said she's never heard of a wellness executive with such a vaunted position.

"It's very rare if it's ever happened before, ever," she said.

Dr. Roizen's tips to a healthier life.

Dr. Michael Roizen, the Cleveland Clinic's chief wellness officer, plans to spread a message of health to employees, patients and residents of Cleveland and beyond.

The healthy-lifestyle guru has made a career of changing people's attitudes and their lives for the better. His latest book, "You: Staying Young," co-authored with Dr. Mehmet Oz, has been one of the best-selling hardcover advice books for weeks.

So, here are some helpful tips from the master himself:

Learn to laugh: Seriously. A good laugh helps improve the immune system, and humor has a valuable effect on your memory.

Get soaked: There's no better way to improve your heart health and feel an adrenaline rush than to work up a good sweat.

De-stress: When you're tense, tasks become more painful and difficult. So take a deep breath, break big projects into little pieces and make sure to track accomplishments.

Take aspirin: Taking 162 milligrams of aspirin a day, which is about two baby aspirins or half a regular tablet, can decrease the risk of colon, esophageal, prostate, ovarian and breast cancers -- all by 40 percent. So talk to your doctor about this option.

Quit smoking: Smoking makes you old, your skin suffers, your lungs clog, and you simply don't breathe as well. Also, stay away from smokers: Spending one hour in the presence of secondhand smoke is the equivalent of smoking four cigarettes.

Eat healthy: A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fish and whole-grain foods offers protection against chronic lung diseases as well as lots of other aging-related diseases and problems.

SOURCE: "You: Staying Young"

While the wellness movement has been around for decades, aging baby boomers and skyrocketing corporate health-care costs have suddenly made the term and its mission more mainstream. Wellness means simply helping people live longer, happier lives, said Brownlee, whose organization began in the late 1970s and has 1,500 members.

Today, most corporations merely give the idea a nod, relegating health promotion to the human-resources department and insurance enrollment incentives. But the Cleveland Clinic desires to be a national leader on the issue, Roizen said. Already, the Clinic burnished a national reputation for healthful efforts when it removed artery-clogging trans fats from every patient meal, cafeteria, restaurant, vending machine and hospital-owned pharmacy in the entire hospital system. In addition, it has refused to hire smokers and earlier this year offered programs to help thousands quit when the state banned smoking from workplaces, restaurants and bars.

"We're getting beyond the notion that hospitals are just a place you go when you get sick to get better," said Bill Ryan, president and chief executive of the Center for Health Affairs, a coalition of Northeast Ohio hospitals. "Everybody understands that we've got to figure out a way to get ourselves out of the fairly steady climb of health-care expenditures, and a significant part of it really is about changing behaviors."

The Clinic couldn't have tapped a more tenacious advocate.

Roizen, whose breezy banter and writing style make the most technical topics accessible, can easily rattle off a litany of dangers associated with being unhealthy.

Four lifestyle choices, he notes, are responsible for 40 percent of the nation's out-of-control health-care costs and much suffering: tobacco, physical inactivity, food choices and stress.

And the problem is only getting worse, Roizen said.

"We as a country, we as a state, we as in Northeast Ohio cannot be as competitive in the world, keep the jobs we have and have as high a standard of living if we don't do something to change that trajectory," he said.

If anything can help make Clevelanders healthier and turn the city into an epicenter of health, it would be the Clinic and Roizen, said Dr. Mehmet Oz, who works with Roizen on the "You" books. Their most recent book, "You: Staying Young," is No. 3 on the New York Times best-selling hardcover advice books and offers a 14-day plan to jump-start a healthy lifestyle.

"I think Cleveland can be the healthiest city in the country because you have an infrastructure that is very strong . . . and that Midwestern no-B.S. attitude," Oz said. "The Cleveland Clinic, which is always in the front line of high tech and

innovation, will now be at the front line for prevention and wellness. It will set a standard for cities around the country." Roizen has been busy the last few months trying to aggregate what the Clinic already does and what it can build on. In-house, he asked employees to submit suggestions on what the Clinic could do to become healthier. More than 1,000 employees responded. Some pointed out that heart attack patients in emergency rooms had received eggs and sausage for breakfast (that changed as soon as Roizen heard about it). Another employee suggested making the stairways more inviting to go up and down.

Roizen also has worked with the Clinic's environmental executive to ensure that all the cleaning products used on Clinic campuses are nontoxic, which means no bleach or other products that could hurt people.

The two meet weekly to drum up more ideas, such as the farmer's market.

Ideally, the market would be near the Clinic's downtown campus, offering the surrounding community fresh fruits and vegetables and instructions on tasty ways to prepare the food.

"If you look at the neighborhood we're in, the access to fresh and healthy foods isn't great," said Christina Vernon Ayers, director of the Clinic's office for a healthy environment. "And as part of our outreach to the community we want to be able to share the importance of healthy grown food."

Roizen's track record for getting such initiatives off the ground is proven. He and his co-author, Oz, launched the HealthCorps program in New York City schools several years ago, and it has since spread to New Jersey, Florida and Pennsylvania.

The program is similar to the Peace Corps. It sends fresh college graduates into school systems to mentor students and teachers about diet, nutrition and exercise. Roizen hopes to pitch the program to the Cleveland School District in the coming months.

At the heart of the HealthCorps program is a message at the core of all of Roizen's efforts:

"How do you live with more energy now and forever?" he asks.

Everyone, he said, should understand they get to "control how long, how well they live and how good their life is."

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December 31, 2007, 4:16PM

Oprah launches yet another career in the public eye, this Dr. meets the definition of "doing something".

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Posted by luddy01

December 31, 2007, 5:02PM

This is great.

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Posted by lovehd

January 02, 2008, 1:43PM

Oprah has nothing to do with Dr. Roizen's success. He is a very respectable anesthesiologist with his own company that he built from the ground up. He has a passion for health and wants all employees and the community to be healthy. Instead of poking fun at the initiatives, more people should take his advice. Cleveland currently is not exactly the vision of health. The Cleveland Clinic is willing to go out on a limb and do something no one else has to benefit the community. He is one of the greatest things that could happen to the Clinic - and Cleveland! Go Dr. Mike!

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Posted by steve4joy

January 02, 2008, 6:12PM

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